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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TOKYO 006475

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SUBJECT: THOROUGHLY MODERN AKIE ABE; JAPAN'S NEW FIRST LADY

Classified By: Ambassador J. Thomas Schieffer. Reasons: 1.4 (B)(D)

11. (SBU) Summary. After more than five years of living under Japan's most famous bachelor, former Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, Japan once again has a First Lady. Since the election of Shinzo Abe as prime minister on September 26, Akie Abe has begun to chart a very different course from her predecessors; giving a long and revealing interview to a widely circulated monthly magazine, holding hands with her husband in public, and taking up her own causes. Her efforts appear to be well received by the Japanese public. As the wife of the youngest prime minister in Japan's post-war history, she seems eager to represent the face of the modern Japanese woman, without alienating the more traditional elements of society. End summary.

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PM Abe: "Times Have Changed"  
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12. (SBU) Foreign press reports that Japan's new first lady, Akie Abe, has taken the country by storm probably overstate her impact thus far. No one can deny, however, that she has already become the most public first lady in Japan's history. Less than two weeks into the new administration, as her husband pulled off consecutive summits in Beijing and Seoul aimed at repairing frayed ties with Japan's Asian neighbors, Mrs. Abe was already making her presence known. In Beijing, she drew attention by walking off the plane holding hands with her husband, an image that was replayed for days on Japanese television. In Seoul, she drew on her Korean language ability to delight her hosts and improve the optics of an otherwise restrained visit. While the wives of previous prime ministers have always participated in State and other public events, none ever made their impact felt so quickly and so publicly. Prime Minister Abe, meanwhile, seems to be encouraging his wife to play an active role, telling CNN: "In the past, wives never came out in front, but times have changed. I would like her to support me as my partner."

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New Role Undefined; Focus on Education, Burma  
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13. (C) While Akie Abe seems intent on maintaining a higher profile than her predecessors, her role in the new administration is as yet undefined. So too is the bureaucratic apparatus necessary to support her activities; Japan has had to wrestle for the first time with creation of an office to support a "professional" first lady. Kuni Miyake, a former MOFA bureaucrat, has already come on board as Mrs. Abe's Chief of Staff. In a conversation with Embassy Tokyo's DCM, Miyake seemed intent on pursuing an ambitious outreach to other first ladies, a move designed to boost Akie Abe's and PM Abe's domestic popularity. In addition to Miyake, Mrs. Abe has a full-time staff member managing her wardrobe and appearance. Mrs. Abe has made clear, however, that she does not play a role in policy formulation or personnel matters. For example, she noted in her extensive magazine interview in Bungei Shunju that she was not consulted on cabinet appointments and had no idea who her husband would select until the day they were announced. She did describe the stress her husband seemed to be under as he pondered who to tap for his cabinet. To show that she can still fulfill the role of a traditional political wife, she also underscored in the interview that her most important job is to "make a relaxing atmosphere at home."

14. (SBU) Demonstrating her ability to balance work and family, Akie Abe has traveled frequently to pursue her own interests, focusing primarily on education and humanitarian efforts in Burma. During a trip with her husband to Washington, DC, she initiated a visit to an elementary school that teaches classes in Japanese, reading to the American students from a picture book on ducks written by former Prime Minister Mori. That exchange led to a sister school relationship between the U.S. school and an elementary school

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in Fukuyama City, Hiroshima. This year, she has already visited Sri Lanka, to view the state of tsunami reconstruction efforts, Washington, Burma, China, and Los Angeles, where she viewed a film on Japanese citizens abducted by North Korea.

15. (SBU) Akie Abe has gained attention in Japan for her campaign to build schools in Burma, which began when her husband was chair of the Parliamentarians' League to Build Schools for Asian Children back in October 2005. Mrs. Abe visited the site of the first project, located adjacent to a temple in Mandalay, in May 2006. The eight-room schoolhouse is expected to be completed by January 2007, and will operate under the temple's management. The charitable group involved in this project is currently considering a program to fund school meals for Burmese students, as a way of encouraging poor families to allow their children to attend. It has also proposed funding doctors to be assigned to the schools, but who would then serve the surrounding communities. Previously, Mrs. Abe toured South Africa and Madagascar with Ayako Sono, chair of the Nippon Foundation, inspecting HIV treatment facilities. In the Bungei Shunju interview, she traces her interest in working on education for poor families to those travels, noting that she and her colleagues from that trip continue to meet regularly in Tokyo through an informal group they call African Night.

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Akie Tells All in Bungei Shunju  
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16. (SBU) Another sign of Mrs. Abe's break with the traditional model of low-profile Japanese first ladies is an unusually wide-ranging and revealing interview with the influential conservative monthly magazine, Bungei Shunju, in November. Her willingness to discuss openly the pressures of a political marriage and her struggles with infertility signal a sharp break from the past. She also used the interview to reveal what could be considered intimate details of her relationship with her husband over the past 20 years, providing readers with insights to his "gentle" side at home.

She describes him as considerate of her interests and self-sufficient, even to the point of ironing his own trousers. Mrs. Abe is already well known as the social drinker in her family, but describes in the Bungei Shunju interview how she first took to drinking with her husband's political support organizations because of his low tolerance for alcohol. She still travels regularly to his electoral district in Yamaguchi Prefecture to attend drinking parties with her husband's supporters. On a more serious note, she dispels rumors that she began studying Korean a few years ago because of her infatuation with Korean soap operas, attributing her interest to her husband's first visit to Pyongyang with Koizumi and the realization that she could make a positive contribution to Japan-DPRK relations.

17. (SBU) One of Akie Abe's reasons for giving the long interview to Bungei Shunju may have been to clear the air on the Abes' lack of children, a sensitive subject in a country with a declining birth rate and where women can still come under tremendous pressure to bear children. Noting that she had received fertility treatment earlier in her marriage but was now too old to keep trying, she admitted feeling pressure as a political wife to bear a child. Her husband had even broached the idea of adopting, she revealed, but she was unable to make up her mind. She accepts not having children by "telling myself that I have been bestowed with a mission to be useful to society by doing things other than raising a child," she told the magazine, adding that women can still lead fulfilling lives without children, as long as they have somewhere to funnel their energies. She also remarked that she was aware of the various campaigns of U.S. first ladies, including Laura Bush's work on literacy, and wished to emulate them. She was open about her initial reluctance to take on the role of a political wife, and credits the training she received from her mother-in-law and her husband's political supporters.

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Biographic Details  
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19. (SBU) Akie Abe, 44, is the eldest daughter of Akio Matsuzaki, who retired as President of Japanese confectionery giant Morinaga & Co. She attended the elite Sacred Heart School in Tokyo from kindergarten through the school's two-year junior college program, where she majored in English. She was working at Dentsu, Inc. one of Japan's largest advertising agencies, when she met Shinzo Abe through one of her bosses. They dated for approximately two years before marrying in June 1987, when she was 25 and he was 32. She disclosed recently that she worked for two years as a disc jockey at a local radio station in Yamaguchi while her husband was Deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary, using a pseudonym to keep her identity secret. She loves music, sports, flamenco dancing, and watching serialized television dramas. She also likes to cook, although she rarely has time. She speaks Korean conversationally, as well as some English.  
SCHIEFFER